

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 3, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

Throughout the world, people turn to their faith to guide them, uplift their spirits, and strengthen their resolve. No one should ever fear practicing their religion or be forced to hide the light of their faith. No faith or denomination should ever be targeted with violence and persecution. Unfortunately, across the globe, human rights abuses against religious minority groups are occurring with startling frequency and severity. These human rights violations have no place in our world, and it is vital that the United States continues to serve as the beacon and protector of religious freedom on the international stage.

One, particularly concerning hotspot is in Nigeria, where a complex and volatile security environment has sparked numerous atrocities, driven people from their homes, and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis. Troubling reports of violence against religious groups, especially the Christian population, have been on the rise. There are widespread instances of intercommunal and militia violence, rampant kidnapping, and general lawlessness preventing the free exercise of religion.

Recently, the situation appears to be worsening. According to the persecution watchdog group Open Doors, more Christians are killed for their faith in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world.¹ One study estimates that 3,462 Christians have been killed in the first 200 days of 2021 alone in Nigeria, many of them brutally hacked to death.² Similarly, some 2,200 Christians are believed to have been abducted from January 1 to April 30, 2021. Just recently, on July 9, 2021, more than 120 children were kidnapped from Bethel Baptist School in northern Nigeria – many

¹ Nigeria. Open Doors USA. (2021, January 12). <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/nigeria/>.

² Catholic News Agency (2021, July 31). Report: 17 Christians killed every day in Nigeria in first half of 2021. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/248547/report-17-christians-killed-every-day-in-nigeria-in-first-half-of-2021>

of whom are still being held captive.³ Furthermore, since the start of the year, approximately 300 Christian churches have been targeted, threatened, or attacked. Over the last 18 years, International Christian Concern estimates between 50,000 to 70,000 Christians have been killed by radical Islamist militants in Nigeria, with another two million displaced.⁴ These numbers are unacceptable.

Religious persecution in Nigeria extends beyond the violence against Christians. Many Muslims, especially the Shi'a minority population, have been similarly targeted with discrimination.

The reality in Nigeria is cause for serious alarm. Militants and bandits are running rampant throughout large sections of the country, targeting religious minority groups and committing horrendous crimes. These individuals are suffering deeply, and the Nigerian government seems to be doing little to handle the situation.

According to the U.S. Department of State, U.S. foreign assistance is used to support "Nigerian efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote good governance and counter corruption, and improve security while addressing the factors that drive conflict and providing life-saving assistance to those affected by terrorism."⁵ The United States is the single largest donor for the humanitarian response in Nigeria, providing nearly \$505 million in Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021. While Nigeria remains an important regional partner in Africa, we must hold them accountable to their commitments. Despite being a signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that provides for the freedom of religion and belief for all people, Nigeria has tolerated and engaged in several violations of international religious freedom in the past. If the Nigerian government has failed to address these issues, then our foreign aid is clearly not being used in conjunction with our stated mission.

Nigeria has had ample opportunity to address these religious liberty concerns but has failed to take sufficient action. In December 2020, Nigeria was added to the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), a State Department designation intended to pressure the world's severest violators of religious freedom. Once a country is added to the CPC list, the USCIRF provides a range of flexible policy options, including possible sanctions to address these severe violations of religious freedom.

Under former President Donald Trump, the United States took significant action across the globe to defend human rights and combat violations of religious freedom. Unfortunately, President Joseph Biden has yet to pick up where his predecessor left off. We strongly encourage President Biden and his entire Administration to swiftly take action to protect the many thousands of people suffering from unspeakable persecution and human rights violations.

³ Voice of America News (2021, July 25). 28 Abducted Baptist School Students Freed in Nigeria.

<https://www.voanews.com/africa/28-abducted-baptist-school-students-freed-nigeria>

⁴ International Christian Concern (2021, July 28). Pastor Tortured, Killed in Nigeria.

<https://www.persecution.org/2021/07/28/pastor-tortured-killed-nigeria/>

⁵ U.S. Department of State (2021, April 29). U.S. Relations with Nigeria. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-nigeria/>

We urge the State Department to investigate these reports of widespread religious violence and persecution in Nigeria, especially against Christians. The State Department must invest in a more robust information gathering network to more reliably access data on allegations of religiously motivated attacks. Additionally, we recommend that Nigeria retains its status on the CPC list until it takes greater steps to address these concerns. Should you feel that congressional action is required to tackle these issues, please inform us so that we may take the necessary measures.

Furthermore, please provide information answering the following questions on how the United States will hold the Nigerian government accountable for protecting all its citizens of all faiths:

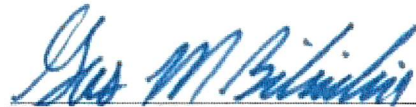
- What information gathering systems will the State Department put in place to monitor reliable data on the human rights situation in Nigeria?
- What necessary steps will the State Department undertake to address this issue of egregious violations of religious freedom in Nigeria?
- How will you work with international partners, the Nigerian government, and non-governmental organizations toward a solution?

As the beacon of liberty, the United States must stand for the downtrodden and persecuted peoples of the world. The situation in Nigeria stands at a critical moment, and let our nation set an example for the world by standing in solidarity with those who are suffering for merely practicing their faith. We look forward to working with you on this matter, and we greatly appreciate your timely response.

Sincerely,



Jody B. Hice
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



Robert B. Aderholt
Member of Congress



Jeff Duncan
Member of Congress



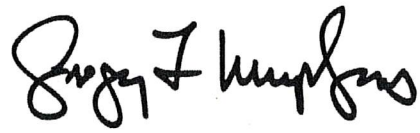
Brian Babin, D.D.S.
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Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.
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Mike Johnson
Member of Congress



Ralph Norman
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Doug LaMalfa
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Scott Perry
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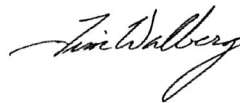
Billy Long
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Mariannette Miller-Meeks
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Tim Walberg
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